

## **Morrison finds himself down the road and Earle strays on the tracks.**

By Peter Stone Brown

Van Morrison, *Down The Road* (Universal)

Steve Earle, *Sidetracks* (ESquared/Artemis)

For about the past ten years, when not doing special project albums with other artists, **Van Morrison** seemed to be making the same album again and again. It seemed that one could almost write the generic Van Morrison song the way one could write the generic country song. Van has three types of songs: The I was in the garden wet with rain listening to the radio in the alley song. The I was lost in the rapture of Yeats, Blake or the poet of your choice while wandering in the garden wet with rain while my Telefunken blasted into the alley song. And the complaining song which is basically: I was screwed by the business men, the press and the morons on the Internet who think they know about me but won't leave me alone because they're all idiots wearing fashionable clothes and following the current trends which has nothing to do with the glorious rapture while listening to Sidney Bechet and reading Wordsworth while searching for the eternal eternal vision of John Lee Hooker jamming with Ray Charles in the Celtic mist in the alley wet with rain song.

*Down The Road* may touch on familiar Morrison themes, but it is definitely a new album and may be his best work since *Hymns to the Silence*. With Morrison it's a matter of finding the groove and how he sings. He sounds not only revitalized but alive, tough and totally in the groove. Musically he's leaning on the blues, but wanders frequently into jazz, country, swing and as well as Celtic-flavored tunes. This is of course typical Morrison territory, but there's something about this album that's totally refreshing in the same way *Moondance* was refreshing more than three decades ago.

Only Morrison could use what is essentially a Jimmie Rodgers framework to write a song about missing Ireland, "What Makes The Irish Heat Beat," complete with an Irish, not a country fiddle and make it work. That he follows it by moving effortlessly into a totally swinging "All Work And No Play" blowing a mean alto sax solo along the way somehow makes perfect sense.

Among the standouts on an album of standouts is "Whatever Happened To P.J. Proby," another swing tune with a structure reminiscent of "Fever." Morrison uses the specter of faded British rock stars to make a strong comment on contemporary culture singing: *There's nothing to relate to anymore/Unless you wanna be mediocre*. In the last verse he turns the question on himself: *Whatever happened to all those dreams a while ago/Whatever happened way across the sea/Whatever happened to the way it's supposed to happen/And whatever happened to me?*

At the beginning of the '80s Morrison began to create a sound that was distinctly his own. Using whatever he needed whether a string section or horns, it wasn't rock, blues or soul, but something that used all those elements to achieve a higher musical plane. It had nothing to do with anything else that was happening at the time, in fact it deliberately ignored any contemporary trend or sound and took the listener to another place. That sound is represented here by "The Beauty Of The Days Gone By," which has the most heartfelt vocal on the album.

The most unexpected song and one that shows that Morrison's writing skills are totally intact is "Man Has to Struggle," where he takes on the entire human condition with startling clarity and a great deal of humor. While much of Morrison's work for the past two decades has had a strong spiritual context, several lines suggest he may have abandoned that line of thought: *Man was told that he was born in original sin/By people long ago that were conning him/Man is so out of touch he can't trust himself/But man's still got to win by cunning and stealth.*

The album concludes with one of the most beautiful songs Morrison has written, "Fast Train." Playing acoustic guitar and harp, and backed by bass, drums, organ and a perfect slide guitar by Johnny Scott, it's sad, soulful and everything a Morrison song should be.

Wherever that mysterious place is that creates the songs that stay with you and become part of your life, Van Morrison tapped into it this time. His totally convincing performance shows that he knows it too.

**Steve Earle** has never used his music to rant about either the great poets or alleys wet with rain, though he has ways of letting you know he knows about them. *Sidetracks* is an album in the old sense of the word: a collection of songs instead of a grand statement and in this case songs that for one reason or another didn't make it onto other albums. In the notes, Earle refers to them as stray tracks since some were written or in the case of the cover tunes, recorded for films and other projects. Either way this group of songs, which ranges from originals including an Irish-flavored fiddle tune instrumental to a fairly crazy selection of covers that includes reggae, psychedelic, Nirvana and Dylan does work as an album.

There is no doubt that Earle is having fun whether dueting with Sheryl Crow on the Chambers Brother's "Time Has Come Today" or rocking hard on Kurt Cobain's "Breed."

The originals include "Some Dreams," written for the movie *The Rookie* which is classic Earle in the rock country vein, and a different than previously released version of "Ellis Unit One" from *Dead Man Walking* featuring the Fairfield Four on backup vocals that is every bit as intense.

After paying tribute to Lowell George's "Willin'" and the Flying Burrito Brother's "My Uncle," Earle winds things up with a slow, building version of Dylan's "My Back Pages." Earle's is a scratch vocal—the released version featured Jackson Browne and Joan Osborne, and he sounds somewhat strained. He explains in the liner notes that the key was out of his range, and jokes that he sounds like his head may explode at any second. I couldn't have put it any better and while initially it was somewhat disconcerting, it's ultimately effective.